

GUITARS IN THE CLASSROOM

ARTISTRY, EDUCATION, AND CULTURAL DIVERSITY

BY JESSICA BARON

[Guitars in the Classroom](#) (GITC) is an eleven-year-old educational non-profit that inspires, trains and equips classroom teachers and educational specialists to provide students with daily hands-on integrated music making. Teachers learn to weave music across the academic curriculum and throughout the school day. More than music making for enrichment, music integration involves infusing student learning with song-based instruction and musical activity that utilizes music as an auditory, oral, visual, and kinesthetic medium to impart ideas, concepts, and information. It gets students to actively participate in learning through listening, singing, keeping time, expressing lyrics through TPR (Total Physical Response) and collaborative songwriting. Some teachers also incorporate and facilitate student guitar playing in their classrooms. Our primary goal is to be sure teachers can play the instrument so they can lead the singing and learning.



What is song-based instruction? Songs that aid the memorization of rote information have long been utilized in classrooms for learning the ABCs, days of the week, and so forth. But music integration goes far beyond mnemonics. We use songs and a variety of song forms to engage students' minds and hearts in the beauty of language, and in details, history, reasons, processes, as well as the humanity and the

values that can be expressed in song. More powerful than words on a page, music has the capacity to activate and motivate the whole learner - and to deepen students' connection to everything they are learning - even to each other. The sense of bonding and community that people experience from singing together translates naturally in a classroom setting turning learning into a joyful experience that promotes well-being and a sense of "belonging" at school. GITC exists to make this training possible and through this work, to promote music making to an integral role in childhood education.



Student/teacher performance adds value to the work because the teachers and children feel themselves filling the artists' shoes when they are asked to share their music from the stage; they begin to see themselves as conveyors of art, and they are most likely to achieve confidence in their self-expression when they are inspired and led by professional musicians and performers. Hence a GITC artist/educator and music integration trainer has the unique charge of bringing non-musicians from first discovery of their musicality all the way to sharing it with classmates, then a larger audience. This total GITC experience was the ultimate goal of our programs in 2010 with funding support from the California Arts Council (CAC).

In traditional GITC classes, teachers enroll in a free course that meets weekly after school and provides them with musical supplies and the use of loaner guitars, courtesy of the organization's sponsoring companies such as Martin, Godin, Greg Bennett, Hohner, and Oriolo Guitars. A simple music curriculum based on a combination of Hawaiian "slack key" guitar tuning and the principles and practices of Orff Schulwerk makes becoming a musical classroom leader an accessible and enriching experience for educators - even for absolute beginners. The classes help veteran educators reinvigorate their teaching practices through the integrated arts and empower new teachers to engage students in creative activities that bring standards-based lessons to life. Teachers of at-risk students and English Language Learners (ELL) draw on the approach for oral language practice that boosts language learning. GITC's AMIGO program (Achievement through Music Integration with Guitars) offers these teachers special songs to promote comprehension, vocabulary, spelling, fluency, expressive language, rhythmically accurate pronunciation, and through loads of lyrical repetition. Song-based learning is far more enjoyable than the old "drill and kill."

AMIGO is making a wonderful difference in working class communities and where Hispanic immigrants settle down in cities and towns that offer them steady employment as agricultural and factory workers. Whether students are challenged by poverty or issues of enculturation, the music helps them love learning and learn well. The original grants to develop AMIGO came from the NAMM Foundation, and in 2010, the work's second year, the CAC gave the NAMM initiative to support the effort a big boost.

Thanks to the CAC, GITC was able to offer Bay Area teachers of ELL students sixteen weeks of training, rehearsals, and performances that took place in five Bay Area locations. Teachers and students from San Francisco, San Pablo, Oakley, Oakland, and San Jose took part. The work reached 1250 students and their families, and concerts were held at Visitacion Valley Elementary School, San Francisco; Oakley Middle School, Oakley; Dover School, San Pablo; REACH Academy, Oakland and Prescott School, Oakland.

When GITC's Executive Director, Jessica Baron, read the CAC/Department of Justice (DOJ) Music Presenting grant program description for creating access to the arts for underserved populations at the CAC website, a connection between the local and popular duo Colibrí and the hard-working families who might enjoy mutli cultural, bilingual performances in which their own children participated was instantly clear.

Alisa Peres and Lichi Fuentes of [Colibrí Music](#) are both experienced music educators and faculty trainers with GITC. They are uniquely qualified to train urban teachers and ELL teachers, to share bilingual songs, and to prepare teachers to lead musical shows! With Colibrí at the heart of the project, the only challenges to achieving CAC's goals were logistical; timing, proximity, cost, inclusivity of siblings, and getting word out to the families and community had to be considered. Parents working two to three jobs and raising many children might find it very difficult to get to a concert. John Seto from the CAC was so encouraging about this idea that I called Alisa and asked her to help me write the grant!



Ms. Baron and Ms. Peres drafted a plan for trainings and performances to take place in near-by "walk to" schools, and to feature music from Spanish speaking cultures. This way, all students could benefit, families could attend, and ELL children could cross the language bridge from Spanish into English through music. Spanish speaking families could enjoy the music, too. After sixteen weeks of training, the teachers and children would perform with their

teachers and Colibrí, then enjoy a set of music by the well-known duo. The CAC jumped on board and everyone got busy strumming and singing.



Explains Peres, “It was an incredible experience working with these school communities and watching the program unfold as we went along. These are teachers who, every day, are dealing with children whose lives are directly affected by poverty, violence and/or the difficulties of living in a foreign country. It can be quite an uphill battle to help their students make academic progress and function at grade level. They are overwhelmed and overworked. Yet they came to guitar class and wholeheartedly embraced what we were offering.”

Some said the class was the high point of their week. After a few weeks, teachers started reporting the changes they were witnessing in their classrooms. GITC received feedback that students had never done so well before on spelling tests, were happier and more relaxed when they sang, and that the ELLs were excited to share words and songs in their first language with other students. Teachers were surprised that their students were learning so much vocabulary in English so quickly. Word of the CAC/DOJ Music Presenting grant programs spread quickly from teacher to teacher and from school to school. GITC classes grew in size and momentum.

The GITC program at the Prescott School in West Oakland is an example of how the music travels with the teachers and how the CAC/DOJ Music Presenting program wound up at that school in particular. GITC was brought to Prescott by Lorraine Mann, a K/1 teacher who had taken GITC classes at a different school the previous year. She believed that her school would benefit with guitar classes on

site and she worked hard to make that happen and even led practice sessions with the beginning guitar player teachers. At Prescott, even the principal was in the guitar class, and they all performed, along with their students and Colibrí, in a spirited concert incredibly well received by their community. [Watch the video!](#)

At all the concerts, teachers were recognized and honored by parents and other community members for their hard work and joyful willingness to incorporate music into their teaching. Most of all, the children were able to shine at these concerts. They often showed up in their best clothing, suits and dresses, and sang their hearts out, to the delight and appreciation of their families.

Because of the success of this CAC funded model, a few months later, GITC was asked to collaborate with the Sobrato Early Academic Learning project (SEAL) in San Jose and Redwood City! We structured the program similarly. We are now conducting classes in two schools in San Jose and one in Redwood City, all with a high percentage of Spanish speakers. Once again, a series of classes begins with a kickoff concert by Colibrí. After eight classes, the teachers plan a community performance where they lead their students in song. So far, the concerts have been standing room only, where the teachers and students performed not only songs learned in class but ones they created themselves as part of their GITC experience. We are very excited about continuing this collaboration and owe our thanks to the California Arts Council!

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